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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/PPD, NEA/ELA, NEA/PI, ECA/A/E/NEA, ECA/PE,  
ECA/P/A, IIP/NEA-SCA

SENSITIVE, SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [KPAO](#) [KMPI](#) [PREL](#) [OEXC](#) [OIIP](#) [SCUL](#) [SY](#) [XF](#)

SUBJECT: MOST WELCOME IN SYRIA

REF: 07 DAMASCUS 1131

¶1. [SBU] SUMMARY: PAO and CAO embarked on a three-day trip to Hama, Homs, and Lattakia, March 3-5. All three cities are in the central/coastal region of Syria. A varied array of Syrians from all ethnic and religious backgrounds -- Sunni, Shia, Alawite, Christian -- welcomed them with open arms, in spite of the backdrop of events in Gaza and U.S. military ships off the coast of Syria. Contacts included English teachers, USG program alumni, writers, students, university professors, and even a Dean at Al-Ba'ath University in Homs. Ignoring an edict from the Ministry of Higher Education forbidding direct contacts with the American Cultural Center and other foreign entities (reftel), officials from the music education faculty displayed an eagerness for cooperation with the Center. END SUMMARY.

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Youth Alumni the Key  
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¶2. [SBU] PD Officers' experiences in Homs and Lattakia highlighted the importance of alumni contacts, especially with youth alumni. In Homs, an informal meeting with a PLUS alumnus currently teaching at the music education faculty at Al-Ba'ath University serendipitously transformed into the first visit by the PAO and CAO to a Syrian university campus, a meeting with the Dean of the department, and a request from the University for cooperation with the American Cultural Center. The officers' mention of the impending visit of an American jazz performer in May generated great excitement. The Dean brushed aside concerns about a ban by the Ministry of Higher Education on contact with the American Cultural Center. The music education department at Al-Ba'ath University is well-equipped, well-designed, and bustling with activity.

¶3. [SBU] In Lattakia, the officers visited an English language center opened by a recent Fulbright MA alumnus, which caters to an under-served, non-elite audience. A meeting with a MEPI Summer Institute alumnus who teaches at Tishreen University and at a private English language institute gave the officers further insight into the state of English education in Lattakia.

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Thirst for English  
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¶4. [SBU] Both Homs and Lattakia boast a multitude of private foreign language centers, which compete fiercely for students and reputation. PD officers met with directors and owners of such institutes and spoke with them about opportunities for cooperation and resources available to aid English teaching, including English language fellows, exchange programs, and information resources. These centers enroll from a few hundred to a few thousand students, many of them university students looking to improve their English. They are an excellent conduit for outreach to university students in an environment where our normal channels of engagement with

universities are blocked.

15. [SBU] COMMENT: The PAO and CAO's experience shows that successful in-country travel is still possible despite the security services' active efforts to subvert it. All the individuals with whom the officers met expressed enthusiasm for cooperation, and all stressed the importance of connecting Americans and Syrians at the educational and cultural levels despite current political tensions.

PD Damascus plans to capitalize upon this fertile environment with more in-country travel, cultural outreach (musicians, artists, writers), a continued strong program of English language teaching and training, and frequent contact with program alumni, especially youth. END COMMENT.

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